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# Culture Change in the Name of Cultural Preservation

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## CULTURE CHANGE IN THE NAME OF CULTURAL PRESERVATION<sup>1</sup>



Young monks eating tsampa

PHOTO: TED SAVAGE

This essay explores the ways that Western economic support for Tibetan exile monasteries in South Asia stimulates (1) the exodus of young males from the Buddhist highlands of Nepal, and (2) the homogenization of diverse religious practices in those same areas. I argue that the attempt to “preserve” Tibetan culture by supporting monks and monasteries has unanticipated consequences that reverberate beyond the point of articulation between patrons and priests. The resultant processes of culture change are veiled by a persistent assumption about the nature of Tibetan societies, namely, that Tibetan culture finds its expression first and foremost in monastic Buddhism, and that anything that does not fit the normative mold represents degeneration from a pristine cultural template (see Ramble 1993).

My argument relates to Shneiderman’s observation that “more static notions of religious identities” are being encouraged throughout the highlands of Nepal by “extra-local entities” (e.g., Tibetan exile monasteries, foreign charitable organizations, and state governments), resulting in “shifts in local notions of religious authority” (Shneiderman n.d.).

At the core of this essay are two interrelated arguments, one demographic and one cultural. The demographic argument begins by noting that money provided by Western donors to support Tibetan *rinpoches* (“precious one”, a title of respect for an esteemed lama) has resulted in a proliferation of monasteries in exile. Meanwhile, the decline of fertility among Tibetan refugees has prompted these resurrected institutions to look for new sources of

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recruits. The ethnically Tibetan, religiously Buddhist, high fertility highlands of Nepal has emerged as their primary recruiting ground. The cultural argument considers the ramifications of these new migration patterns. Some individuals from Nepal's highlands who receive training in the exile monasteries subsequently become catalysts for culture change; returning to their natal villages, they encounter religious systems that differ from the ones they were trained in, and set out to rectify matters. In short, the working hypotheses for this essay are the following:

Hypothesis 1: The recent proliferation of exile monasteries, supported in part by foreign patrons, has increased the demand for monks. The rapid fertility decline among Tibetan exiles has stimulated the intensification of recruitment efforts in Nepal's Buddhist highlands, resulting in an unprecedented level of out-migration of young males.

Hypothesis 2: The goal of preserving Tibetan culture is a rationale for Westerners to support Tibetan exile monasteries. An unintended consequence of foreign patronage for these monasteries is the loss of cultural diversity in the ethnically Tibetan, Buddhist highlands of Nepal.

This is not the first study to examine the interactions between Tibetan Buddhists and Western disciples (e.g., Batchelor 1994; Lopez 1998; Prebish and Baumann 2002; Moran 2004; Zablocki 2005). My own approach to this topic diverges from other studies of "transnational Buddhism" (1) by concentrating on cultural changes that occur in places far removed from the points of contact between Westerners and their Tibetan Buddhists, and (2) by examining the interactions between the transnational flow of charitable giving and demographic trends.

The social impacts that Western economic systems have on local communities is an important topic in the social sciences. Several decades ago critics of modernization theory posited that so-called "traditional societies" (those characterized by their isolation, impoverishment, and adherence to customs) were in fact created through marginalization; that is, they are by-products of capitalism and colonialism (Frank

1967; Wallerstein 1979). Anthropologists working from the perspective of political economy contributed important studies about changes instigated when local communities become integrated into a global, capitalist market system (e.g., Wolf 1982). A derivative of this research is the current focus on "globalization" (Eriksen 2003; Trouillot 2003). Although definitions of this concept vary across disciplines and according

to theoretical interests, one that is particularly succinct and useful for the purpose of this essay is the following: "Contemporary globalization is the increasing flow of trade, finance, culture, ideas, and people brought about by the sophisticated technology of communications and travel by the worldwide spread of neoliberal capitalism, and it is the local and regional adaptations to and resistance against these flows" (Lewellen 2002).

Lewellen's definition is used here as a starting point to sort out the local and regional adaptations resulting from the flows of capital between Westerners and exile monasteries, albeit in this case the focus is on charitable giving rather than on the spread of capitalism. Modern communications and the relative ease of international travel help facilitate the flow of capital between Western patrons and their Tibetan lamas. Gone are the days when disciples had to journey to the East to meet their mentors. Nowadays some rinpoches live

more or less permanently in the West; many of their disciples have never set foot in Nepal, India, or Tibet. Modern communications diminish the distance between students and teachers. I recall sitting with a rinpoche in Kathmandu when a disciple called his cell phone from the U.S. to discuss a bad dream and other obstacles to his meditation practice. The internet also eases the dissemination of information across the globe. Travel and teaching schedules of rinpoches are regularly posted on sites associated with Buddhist organizations. A cursory Google search uncovered itineraries for more than twenty different lamas who will travel from South Asia to the U.S. during the summer of 2005. The increasing frequency and intensity of international contacts has made it easier than ever for lamas to relay their requests to foreign patrons, and for those patrons to convert the requests into monetary support by raising funds that then enter the trans-



Young monk, Paro

PHOTO: GARY GOLDENBERG





national stream of capital.

Before proceeding, some caveats are in order. First, Westerners are not the only ones who patronize Tibetan lamas and their monasteries in exile. A considerable amount of funding comes from Taiwan (both from government and private sources), and in more recent times from Buddhist communities in Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Malaysia (Moran 2004; Zablocki 2005). The focus on Western patrons is prompted by the explicit connection they often make between charitable giving and cultural preservation, an ideology that sets them apart from benefactors in other countries. Second, for the purpose of simplifying the analysis, this paper centers exclusively on monks. Nuns are excluded for practical and demographic reasons [I have better data on monks, and monks outnumber nuns nine to one in the Tibetan exile population (Planning Council 2000:215)]. Third, I have created what many will consider a false dichotomy between Buddhist monasticism and village-level religious practices, a gross simplification that glosses over the historical, syncretistic processes that have shaped Tibetan religion over the course of centuries (see Kapstein 2000). My justification for doing so is that a degree of generalization is necessary to make some of my points, and hope that it will not prove to be too much of a distraction. Finally, a methodological clarification is in order. I am using the internet as a source of data. Unlike printed publications, web sites are ephemeral. Between writing the initial (2002) and final (2005) editions of this essay many of the web sites quoted herein have changed their contents. Therefore, the reader will have to take it on trust that I am accurately citing the postings from previous times.

## WESTERN VISIONS OF TIBETAN BUDDHIST SOCIETY

Westerners have been selective when it comes to understanding and portraying Tibetan society (Bishop 1990; Lopez 1998), being far more captivated by the esoteric, philosophical dimensions of Buddhism than by village-level religious practices. Not only were Buddhism and “folk religion” analytically separated in earlier academic writings (Hoffman 1975; Tucci 1980), these days most primers on Tibetan religion present the histories and philosophies of the major Buddhist sects while ignoring altogether the folk traditions (e.g., Powers 1995; Thurman 1995; Ray 2002; Newman 2004; c.f. Samuel 1993). To be fair, these books are about Tibetan Buddhism, not about syncretistic religious practices in a Tibetan social context. Nevertheless, I suspect that the tendency to focus on normative aspects of monastic Buddhism can be partially explained by a common refrain one hears among Western Buddhists, namely, that “Buddhism is a philosophy, not a religion”. Adopting such a perspective allows one to relegate many religious practices

to the periphery since they are not “Buddhist” and hence are of little relevance. Obviously, rituals meant to propitiate malevolent forces that threaten crops or bovines have no applicability in the life of a suburban-dwelling Western disciple.

Tibetan exiles are also active agents in propagating specific images of their society for strategic purposes (Huber 2001). They are adept at “deploying” a vision of their culture to mobilize political support (McLagan 1997), including the viewpoint that certain monastic-based rituals benefit all of humanity (Schrempf 1997). Prodded by the favorable reception that they have received in the West, Tibetans now help disseminate the equation that normative monastic Buddhism equals Tibetan culture.

The task of perpetuating the above equation is now fulfilled—whether consciously or not—by people whose views carry considerable weight with the general public, including leaders of the Tibetan exile community and Western supporters of Tibetan causes. For example, the Tibetan Government-in-Exile’s official web site contains a section titled “Tibetan Culture” ([www.tibet.com](http://www.tibet.com), viewed 6/05). The vast majority of essays focus on religious leaders and the monastic tradition. Tibet House Trust, a Tibetan charity inaugurated by the Dalai Lama, states as an objective “to preserve Tibetan identity and culture.” Under “cultural activities”, the organization listed a Buddhist seminar in London and sponsorships for monks and nuns ([www.tibet.com/Trust/trust](http://www.tibet.com/Trust/trust), viewed 2/02). The Students for a Free Tibet web page used to contain a blurb on “Tibetan Culture” that was exclusively devoted to the teachings of Sakyamuni ([www.tibet.org.sft](http://www.tibet.org.sft), viewed 2/02). The Amitabha Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to “preserving and promoting the unique beauty of Tibetan culture while providing for the needs of Tibetan refugees living in exile,” asserted on their web page that,

Tibetan culture is inextricably intertwined with Buddhist forms. Indeed, it is impossible to effectively introduce Tibetan culture to an American audience without presenting Buddhist ceremony or philosophy.  
([www.amitabhafoundation.org](http://www.amitabhafoundation.org), viewed 2/02)

Finally, Tibet House, a well-endowed organization in New York patronized by some high-profile public figures, runs a Tibetan Studies Program. In 2002 their stated goal was,

[To] develop a comprehensive overview of the insights, experiences and practices essential to understanding the Tibetan world view. It is divided into three modules: the yoga of ordinary living; women and Buddhism in the West; and the transformative relationship in spiritual development and psychotherapy. In addition, there is a workshop exploring the intertwined nature of faith, meditation and practice in Buddhism today, and a second workshop on the spiritual problem of giving yourself away ([www.tibethouse.org](http://www.tibethouse.org), viewed 2/02).



These are just a sampling of perspectives that help shape the Western imagination about Tibetan culture. The message they propagate is that monastic Buddhism and its esoteric teachings represent the essence of Tibetan culture; everything else is peripheral. Monasteries and religious education have unquestionably been cornerstones of Tibetan society for centuries—that point is beyond debate. As highly visible institutions possessing considerable prestige (the clergy was situated at the apex of the social hierarchy) and power (political might was wielded through the control over productive resources), monasteries occupied a preeminent position within Tibetan society. Their role in shaping Tibetan culture has been profound, yet monasteries represent only one aspect of Tibetan religion: they did not have a monopoly on the spiritual life of the communities they dominated. Village religious practices, characterized by one scholar as having a “pragmatic orientation” (Samuel 1993), centered on a plethora of deities inhabiting the natural environment. Lay people devoted a great deal of time and energy to placating these deities, arguably far more so than listening to sermons by lamas or studying Buddhist scripture (prior to recent times most Tibetans were illiterate).

Similarly, an inescapable lesson deriving from my long-term fieldwork in the ethnically Tibetan enclave of Nubri (Gorkha District, Nepal—until the 1850s a part of rDzongdga’ District in Tibet) is that a Tibetan religious system involves far more than monasteries and monks (Childs 2004). I refer to it as a religious system, since the entirety of ritual and spiritual life relies on several specialists operating within a well-delineated division of labor. Nubri has a few celibate monks (*dge-slong*) who spend much of their time delving into the most esoteric teachings and practices, while also dispensing spiritual advice to community members. Meanwhile, lineage lamas (*sngags-pa*) perform ceremonies to accomplish mundane objectives such as warding off bovine pestilence, assuring the longevity of a patron, removing the pollution associated with childbirth, or dispelling hidden forces that cause illness. The *pha-jo* (similar to the *bon-po* and *lha-bon* elsewhere) is responsible for making offerings to the local protector deity (*yul-lha*) in order to maintain harmony between the villagers and the natural elements, while the astrologer (*rtsis-pa*) composes natal horoscopes for every child that is born and calculates auspicious days for weddings and funerals. Many laymen are labeled *mchod-pa*, part-time practitioners with rudimentary liturgical training who mainly participate in communal rituals. Nuns (*a-ni jo-mo*) occupy a socially ambiguous position since their familial function as caretakers for aging parents is valued more highly than their role as ritual participants (see also Gutschow 2004). The diverse religious practitioners function as a team, each recognizing his or her sphere of authority and not encroaching upon the domains of the others. Villagers do not con-

ceptualize a dichotomy between Buddhist and non-Buddhist liturgical practices, preferring instead to view all aspects of their religious system as an interdependent whole. In this regard Nubri is by no means unique, as attested by the ethnographic literature on the Himalayan region (see for example Clarke 1980; Holmberg 1989; Mumford 1989; Ramble 1990; Diemberger 1992).

In places such as Nubri, Yolmo (Clarke 1980), and until recently Khumbu (Ortner 1989), monasteries populated by celibate monks are less central to religious life than communal temples presided over by married lamas. The predominance of Nyingmapa affiliation no doubt helps explain the way that religion is integrated within Nepal’s highland societies. Celibate monasteries do exist, but compared to Tibet are rare, less prominent in the socioeconomic realm, and in many places are newcomers that were established during the twentieth century. The Sherpas, for example, built their first monastery for celibate monks less than one hundred years ago (Ortner 1989). In short, the social organization of religion in the ethnically Tibetan communities of Nepal is quite different from the representation of Tibetan Buddhist society that is popular in the West.

China’s repressive rule in Tibet led to the flight of some of Tibet’s most eminence lamas to Nepal and India. They were accompanied by thousands of lay people, including many who specialized in the performance of “non-Buddhist” rituals. Once in exile these latter individuals found a diminished role to play in society. For one, the preponderance of their rituals was intimately tied to the landscapes of their ancestral homelands. How can one propitiate a *yul-lha* if the mountain abode of that deity lays across the Himalayan massif in Tibet? Vestiges of village religion that have managed to survive are often denigrated. Recall, for example, how the astrologer in Khyentse Norbu’s film *The Cup* was portrayed as a drunken, disheveled, malodorous buffoon. One man who used to specialize in propitiating protective local deities informed me that clerics in exile have discouraged him from performing his rituals. Unlike village-based practices which have withered to the point of non-existence, monastic Buddhism could be disengaged from the surrounding landscape and continues to enjoy a prestigious position in exile society. Resurrection is proof of its adaptability. As a result, visitors to the Tibetan communities of Nepal and India can easily come away with the impression that monastic Buddhism is, and always has been, the centerpiece of Tibetan religious culture. It therefore seems natural to equate support for such institutions with the preservation of Tibetan culture.

## THE NATURE OF PATRONAGE

Most monasteries in pre-1959 Tibet were supported by their land holdings, or more accurately, by the peasants who





farmed monastery lands and performed *corvée* labor in exchange for a stipulated portion of the produce and other rights (Carrasco 1959; Surkhang 1986). For example, during the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama (late 1600s), Drepung monastery's population of 4,200 monks was sustained by 553 lay households (Dung-dkar 1991:74). Members of those households did not fund the monastery through voluntary donations. Rather, their support was part of a contractual agreement between the owners of the land (Drepung) and the peasants, the majority of whom were born into positions of servitude to the monastery.

The resurgence of Tibet's monasteries in exile was contingent upon finding new sources of funding. As refugees they could not replicate the land tenure system that previously existed in Tibet, but as Klieger (1991) argues, Tibetans have successfully invoked a traditional priest-patron relationship (*chos-yon*) to derive benefits from their interactions with foreigners. By the mid 1990s there were an estimated 45 Tibetan monasteries scattered about the Kathmandu Valley (Frechette 2004:111). The primary means of support came

through Western patronage. According to Frechette,

Tibetan Lamas, according to one estimate [source of estimate not revealed], can earn as much as \$40,000 to \$60,000 through just one tour of the U.S. or Europe. When they establish dharma centers (teaching centers) in the U.S. or Europe, they create a more continuous source of foreign funds. According to one source [derived from Coleman 1993], 77 percent of all Tibetan lamas in exile have traveled to the U.S. or Europe, and 51 percent have emigrated to Europe, the U.S., Canada, Australia or New Zealand to resettle in dharma centers. They use the foreign donations they solicit through their tours and dharma centers to finance their monasteries in Nepal and India (2004:111-112).

From an early date some Westerners equated support for Tibetan monasteries with the preservation of Tibetan culture. According to one perspective,

The first Americans to work for the survival of Tibetan culture were originally attracted to Buddhist philosophy. Through contact with Buddhist forms they came to work for Tibetan survival. These people remain the backbone for western support



Children with photo of Dalai Lama

PHOTO: TED SAVAGE



of the Tibetans' struggle to preserve their threatened traditions. ([www.amithabafoundation.org](http://www.amithabafoundation.org), viewed 2/02)

Today, a recurrent refrain among monasteries in exile and the Western organizations that sustain them is that supporting monks is a means to safeguarding Tibetan culture. The internet has become an important source for spreading the message and soliciting funds to accomplish this objective. For example,

The Drepung Loseling Educational Fund was established in 1988 to preserve traditional Tibetan culture by sponsoring a monk in training at Drepung Loseling. (<http://www.drepung.org>, viewed 6/05)

Kopan Monastery, home of a very popular meditation course for foreign visitors to Nepal, made the appeal, "Help save Tibetan culture: sponsor a Tibetan monk or nun" ([www.kopan-monastery.com](http://www.kopan-monastery.com), viewed 2/02). A monastery in India requests,

To assist Drepung Gomang Monastery in its mission to educate and train monks in the Buddhist philosophy of wisdom and compassion and to prevent the extinction of the culture of Tibet, we ask that you sponsor a monk at the monastery ([www.gomang.org](http://www.gomang.org), viewed 6/05)

Another historically significant institution makes the following appeal:

Gyuto Tantric University in India is one of the few remaining places where the ancient, sacred Tibetan teachings are available. Therefore, many young men continue to risk their lives to journey over the boarder from Tibet to India, to join the monks and become one of their number. Your donation will not only help support a Gyuto monk - it will help preserve these ancient practices as well. ([www.gyuto.va.com.au](http://www.gyuto.va.com.au), viewed 6/05)

Organizations in the West make similar petitions. Tibetan Monastery, based in New York City, with the mission "to preserve the unique spiritual wisdom and cultural heritage of Tibet through providing a wide range of programs on Buddhism and Tibetan culture", is a conduit for sponsoring a monk or nun ([www.tibetanmonastery.com](http://www.tibetanmonastery.com), viewed 2/02). Similarly, the Tibetan Sponsorship Project states, "Our vision is to see the Tibetan religion and culture remain alive and flourish." One of their methods for accomplishing this objective is to fund a monk ([www.tibetaid.org](http://www.tibetaid.org), viewed 2/02). The newsletter of a Buddhist organization in the U.S. discloses the amount of funding that they sent to their lama's monastery, then states, "Through this effort, each sponsor helps these young monks in the process of studying and preserving the precious Dharma, as well as their Tibetan culture" ([www.kurukulla.org](http://www.kurukulla.org), viewed 6/05). Similarly, one particular solicitation for sponsorship argues:

The Monks are of vital importance to the progress of Buddhism. The monks are the major source and labor behind the preservation of the Tibetan language, culture, dance rituals,

prayers and practices, written language (Sanskrit) and holy traditions and transmissions brought from India by the most excellent master Padmasambhava. ([www.ripaladrang.org](http://www.ripaladrang.org), viewed 6/05)

Finally, one organization entreats,

Help these young people [i.e., the monks pictured on the web site] to inherit the richness of their own culture. This is a rare opportunity to preserve a vital link for future generations

([www.shechen.org](http://www.shechen.org), viewed 6/05).

The above citations represent a mere sample of sponsoring organizations. Others do not make the explicit claim that supporting a monk is synonymous with saving Tibetan culture. Nevertheless, they still transmit this very message, at least implicitly, by including a history section outlining the rise of Buddhist monasticism in Tibet, its demise under Chinese rule in Tibet, and its resurrection in exile. The accompanying claims of "cultural genocide" leave no doubt that providing support for an exile monastery is akin to preserving Tibet's cultural heritage.

## MONASTIC PATRONAGE: A STIMULUS FOR MIGRATION

*Hypothesis 1: The recent proliferation of exile monasteries, supported in part by foreign patrons, has increased the demand for monks. The rapid fertility decline among Tibetan exiles has stimulated the intensification of recruitment efforts in Nepal's Buddhist highlands, resulting in an unprecedented level of out-migration of young males.*

When exile monasteries were few in number the refugees could be counted on to fill the ranks by producing an adequate supply of children. As recently as 1987 the exiles' Total Fertility Rate (the average number of children who would be born to each woman in a population if age-specific fertility rates remain constant) exceeded six births per woman (Childs et. al. 2005). As monasteries began to proliferate their supply of monks was reinforced by a new wave of refugees. During the 1980s China's relaxing of restrictions on religion in Tibet was followed by crackdowns that forced many novice monks to flee across the Himalayas where they were absorbed into the exile monasteries. Laymen who escaped Tibet further swelled the ranks when persuaded by resettlement officials to become monks on the grounds that they would gain education and social status, not to mention food and shelter in an alien land, and would consequently be less of a burden on society.

Meanwhile, major demographic changes were underway. Exile fertility plummeted from over six births per woman in 1987 to less than two births per woman by 2000 (Childs et. al. 2005). Those sons who were born to refugee parents during the fertility transition were not likely to be designated



monks. Through interviews with young couples in Kathmandu and Dharamsala, I learned that most prefer secular education over monasticism for their children, believing that the decision to become a monk should be a matter of individual volition rather than parental prerogative. Secular education is now nearly universal among exiles. According to 1998 statistics 94% of exile children aged 5-16 in India and Nepal were currently being educated in schools and monasteries. Among those, the vast majority (96%) were in secular schools (Planning Council 2000).

A forty-year emphasis on secular education has led to a transformation in the value that exiles place on monastic education. One young man stated (and claimed this to be a common sentiment among people of his cohort) that monasticism is a lesser option in life that is only fitting for those who fail to thrive in school, or who show little aptitude for business.

The fertility decline and attitudinal changes have caused a dramatic reduction in the number of monks that the refugees are now able—or willing—to supply to the exile monasteries, thereby instigating a shift in recruitment strategies. According to the testimony of one lama who heads several monasteries and convents in Nepal,

During the time of the decrease in my merit, the Buddha Dharma in the land of snow (Tibet) was diminishing. This was especially the fate of [name of monastery] . . . At that time I became a refugee and did not know where to go. During this time of hardship, having the motivation to keep my monastery alive, I purchased a small piece of land in front of the Great Stupa of Boudhanath in Kathmandu, Nepal and built a small monastery, which I named [name of monastery]. After building the monastery in Boudha, it was difficult to find children who wanted to become monks. I decided to ask some people I knew about finding children who wished to be monks. They said, "Nowadays all people want to go to school and study or to do business and earn much money. It's almost impossible to find children to become monks." After hearing this, I was very depressed and disappointed but nevertheless I made a fruitful aspiration with good motivation and put many Chakras (mandalas) of the Sangha and Harmony of the Sangha into the main Buddha statue of the monastery. As a result of that, [person's name] became the first monk from Nupri Village [Nubri Valley], Gorkha [District], Nepal. Eventually the number of monks grew and flourished and soon there were almost

as many monks as in the monastery in Tibet. ([www.rinpoche.com/Nupri/englishletter.htm](http://www.rinpoche.com/Nupri/englishletter.htm), viewed 6/05)

Today, the preponderance of recruitment efforts centers on children from the ethnically Tibetan borderlands of Nepal and India. Go to any Tibetan monastery in Boudhanath and ask junior monks to state their place of origin. You will find that the vast majority are ethnic Tibetans from Nubri, Tsum, Mustang, and Dolpo, Sherpas from Solu-Khumbu,

Tamangs from Rasuwa District, and so forth. You will be hard pressed to find anybody under age fifteen who was born in Kathmandu to refugee parents.

The persistence of high fertility makes these areas productive grounds for recruitment. The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) in the highlands of Nepal (4.8 births per woman) is higher than in the middle hills (4.0) or *terai* (4.1) (Ministry of Health, New ERA, and ORC Macro 2002: 56). TFRs for villages in Nubri range from 5.3 to 7.0 births per

woman (Childs 2001). Bear in mind that these figures represent an average that is mitigated by religious celibacy, infertility, and premature sterility. It is not uncommon for married women to give birth to ten or more children, albeit the extremely high level of infant and childhood mortality reduces the number of offspring who reach maturity. Nevertheless, because mortality declines often precede fertility declines, many highland areas of Nepal where monks are now being recruited may be experiencing rapid population growth. Although no site-specific studies from the highlands exist to confirm this suspicion, aggregate data on the northernmost districts of Nepal suggests a significant decline in under-five mortality (i.e., infant plus childhood mortality) occurred between 1996 and 2001 [from 208 deaths per 1000 live births to 157 deaths per 1000 live births (Pradhan et. al. 1997:104; Ministry of Health, New ERA, and ORC Macro 2002:131)]. If this is the case, then parents are confronting the reality that more of their children are surviving to maturity.

In Nubri, dispatching a son to reside in one of Kathmandu's monasteries has emerged as an important post-natal option for parents to manage the size and composition of their families. The decision is based on a combination of cultural and economic rationales. The cultural incentive is that



Boys in school, Dharamsala

PHOTO: TASHI TSERING





parents and their son accrue blessings (*sbyin-rlabs*) and good fortune (*bsod-lde*). From an economic perspective, sending a son away removes him from the inheritance equation. Local regulations stipulate that no more than two brothers can marry a single wife, thereby placing limits on polyandry as an option parents can use to manage their assets over time. All sons have an equal entitlement to claim their inheritance at marriage. Therefore, if there are three sons in a family and none are monks, then the estate must be divided into at least two portions. Sending one son away to be a monk and contracting a polyandrous marriage for the other two ensures that the family assets will be transferred intact to the next generation.

Removing a son from the household also shifts the cost of his upbringing from the parents to the religious institution, or more accurately, to foreign patrons. This benefit is not lost on parents. Although the people of Nubri are by no means threatened by starvation, their economic fortunes can wax and wane as a result of political decisions beyond their control, for example the prohibiting or permitting of trade of *dbyar-rtsa dgun-'bu* (cordyceps sinensis, a medicinal herb), or China's decisions to close the border in response to outbreaks of hoof and mouth disease. Throw in the usual hazards such as winter avalanches that can decimate one's herd, late snows and frosts that can doom a crop, or the death of a young and productive worker in the family, and one can begin to appreciate the degree of uncertainty that plagues families in Nubri. Sending a son to the secure confines of a monastery is a form of risk reduction.

Finally, once a talented monk comes of age he can garner a substantial income by giving teachings or performing rituals for affluent refugees and Western patrons. Personal relationships with the latter can also result in sponsorships dispensed as occasional gifts or monthly stipends. Some of this cash returns as remunerations to parents back in their highland villages. Although I have no data detailing levels of such remunerations, I have heard parents in Nubri comparing notes with each other about the amount of money their sons send back each year.

Sending a son away to be a monk is a long-term, household-level, economic diversification strategy. Contrary to common assumption, sending sons from Nubri to Tibetan monasteries does not necessarily represent continuity with tradition—at least not in terms of the sheer numbers of children who are sent these days. Prior to 1959 a few men from Nubri resided in Tibetan monasteries, most notably at nearby Dagkar Taso (Brag-dkar rTa-so) situated to the north of Kyirong. However, a proper monastic education entailed significant donations by parents, which presumably acted as a disincentive. The situation has been changed by the proliferation of exile monasteries and the subsidies provided for monks by foreign patrons; the cost to parents has been

significantly reduced (in fact, there is often no cost). By 1997, the year I conducted a demographic survey, roughly 30% of all male children in some Nubri villages were living in the monasteries of Kathmandu and India. One man recently lamented that there are virtually no children between the ages of five and fifteen remaining in his village. Such a high level of monastic out-migration is unprecedented in Nubri, and is bound to have implications for all aspects of society.

## CULTURE CHANGE IN THE NAME OF CULTURAL PRESERVATION

*Hypothesis 2: The goal of preserving Tibetan culture is a rationale for Westerners to support Tibetan exile monasteries. An unintended consequence of foreign patronage for these monasteries is the loss of cultural diversity in the ethnically Tibetan, Buddhist highlands of Nepal.*

The second hypothesis seems counterintuitive. As established above, patronizing religious institutions is endorsed by Tibetans and their Western supporters as a primary means for preserving—not transforming—Tibetan culture. The mere presence of monastic institutions in exile is cited as tangible evidence that Tibetan culture is alive and thriving, and in this regard foreign patronage has definitely contributed to the perseverance of Tibetan culture. However, the second hypothesis concerns the ripple effects of patronage that radiate outward from Kathmandu, in particular, the unanticipated cultural transformations occurring in the indigenous Tibetan communities of highland Nepal that trace their roots to the resurgence of monasticism in exile.

Subsidies for monks draw many highland children to Kathmandu's monasteries, a process that can be characterized as a rural "brain drain". The sheer quantity of migration significantly reduces the pool of young men who might otherwise have aspired to village-based religious vocations (e.g., *bon-po* or *rtsis-pa*). Furthermore, one must consider the quality of those children who are sent. In an African setting anthropologist Caroline Bledsoe has documented the criteria parents use to assess the personal attributes of their offspring and determine which of a family's scarce resources should be devoted to the upbringing of each child. The strategic intent is to maximize each child's potential to contribute to the household through the development of social networks, economic assistance from paid employment, and so forth (Bledsoe 1990). Similarly, parents in Nubri are aware that talented and properly educated monks can reap significant monetary rewards. It is thereby safe to assume that parents do not send sons at random to the monastery. Elsewhere I have noted that children smitten with disabilities are often designated to be village-resident monks (Childs 2004:70-71). However, sending a disabled son to a monastery presided over by a revered rinpoche is considered inappropriate. Do



parents send their most intellectually gifted children to the monasteries? If so, their actions would amplify the intensity of the brain drain.

Children from rural areas of Nepal who are raised and educated in urban environments often develop a disdain for their natal villages (dirty, undeveloped, no modern amenities) and the villagers they left behind (uneducated, uncouth, and unclean), a process that is integrally tied with the discourse on development (see Des Chene 1996). In terms of religious orientations, a cultural divide also arises between those who are educated and think of themselves as modern, and those rural-dwellers whom they characterize as being “backwards” and “ignorant” (Bista 1991; see also Pigg 1996). In terms of religious orientations, a cultural divide also arises between young men who are raised at prestigious institutions in Kathmandu and those who remain in the villages. Upon returning home they encounter religious practices that do not accord with what they have learned in the monasteries. I have spoken with monks who disparage local religious practices on the grounds that they are corrupt and degenerate [some most certainly are, from a normative Buddhist perspective, e.g., animal sacrifice (Childs 1997)]. Furthermore, monks who return home are accorded places of honor due to their vocation, education, and status as disciples of great masters. Therefore, one can expect their opinions on religious matters to hold much sway, especially as they become older and gain influence. The question remains, do returning monks instigate changes by trying to replicate the monastic systems in which they spent their formative years?

Some monks from the highlands of Nepal have reached maturity and now occupy senior administrative and liturgical positions within the exile monasteries of Kathmandu and India. As potential gatekeepers, they are placed in an ideal position to interact with their lama’s Western disciples. Sev-

eral have even accompanied their lamas on teaching tours to Buddhist centers throughout the Western world. Education, aptitude, and exposure to Western disciples can help a monk forge personal contacts. Following the precedence set by their own lamas, these contacts can translate into support for new monastic initiatives back in their highland villages, akin to a process described by Ramble concerning relationships between tourists and indigenous Himalayan communities.

And now there is the Third Diffusion [of Buddhism], originating in the exile community. . . . The burgeoning international interest in the Tibetan cause has less to do with a sporting sympathy for the underdog than with a real appreciation of the



Reading sacred texts, Zanskar

PHOTO: MARTIN HARTLEY (C/O [WWW.MARTINHARTLEY.COM](http://WWW.MARTINHARTLEY.COM))

universal relevance of Tibetan Buddhism. But the Third Spread is not limited to the first-world public undergoing a spiritual crisis. It is also reaching the Tibetan-speaking people of the Himalayan rimland. How?

The common enough scenario is that a businessman from, say, Japan, United States or Taiwan becomes impassioned by the Tibetan cause and goes trekking in the Himalaya. Because he has Tibet on his mind, what he sees is a Tibetan culture apparently fallen into decline: a struggling language, illiterate monks, dilapidated temples, and a degenerate Lamaist tradition. With the blessing of his lama (who probably has never



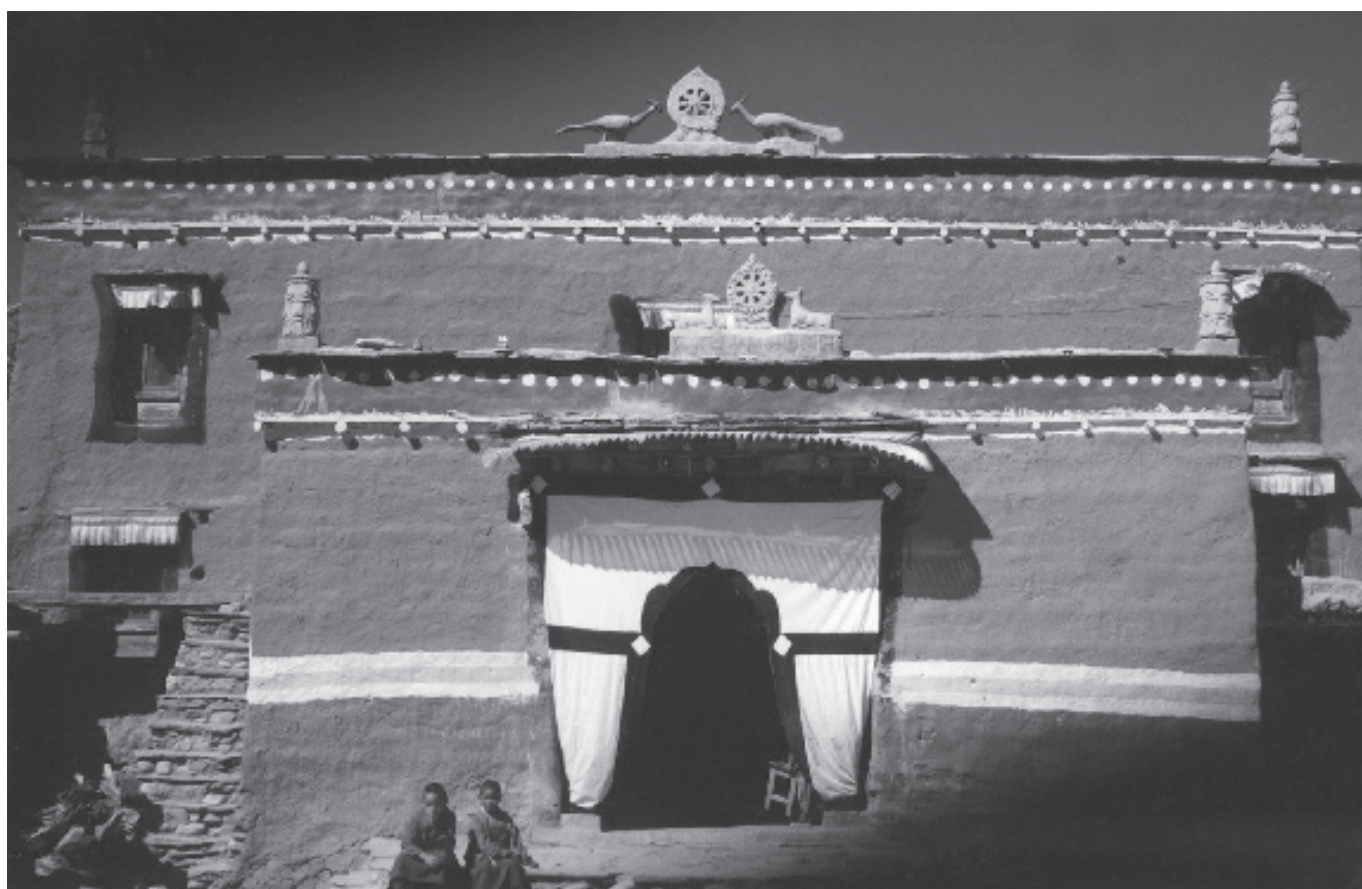


been to this place), he elects to help the area by building a monastery. No objection, naturally, from the locals, who have not to examine the gift horse too closely. To the outsider, at least, the act looks like the commendable resuscitation of a failing Buddhist heritage. (Ramble 1993:25)

Add to the trekking “businessman” another type of person, “Western Buddhist”—one who is already enamored by Tibetan religion and especially the monastic traditions—and you have parallel recipes for inducing culture change. On the one hand monks who return to their villages are in a good position to solicit donations from tourists to support religious institutions. In places like Nubri, monks educated in exile institutions are often the only locals who possess a solid command of the English language. Their red robes are the visible symbol of Buddhist culture that foreigners yearn to encounter on their treks to the highlands, so they are well situated to act as mediums for the support that Ramble alludes to. On the other hand, I have encountered many Western Buddhists who view the Himalayan hinterlands as cultural backwaters, places where an infusion of monastic institutions can reverse their relapsing tendencies and return them to less adulterated forms of religious practice and social organization. According to such a world view, the Himala-

yan borderlands occupy an intermediary ground between the pure land of Tibet where religion has been eradicated and the resurrected monasteries in exile where the traditions are being preserved. Transposing the monastic template to indigenous Tibetan communities of Nepal is considered both compassionate and progressive. Monks educated in exile monasteries, in particular those who have risen in the monastic hierarchy and have foreign contacts, are the logical conduits through which such a process can be facilitated.

A new monastery is now nearing completion in Nubri. Funding is provided by a well-endowed institution in India, which in turn is patronized by scores of devotees from the West. The point-men for construction are three *mkhan-bu* (disciples of the main monastery’s abbot), two of whom are thirty year-old monks who were born in Nubri and sent to South India while youths. When the monastery opens in the summer of 2006 it is expected to be populated by fifty or so monks who are presently undergoing training in South India. Their return will partially offset the out-migration stimulated by monastic recruitment. In addition, their ascent of the local religious hierarchy will inevitably transform ritual practices and social structures that have evolved *in situ* over the centuries.



Chyodi Gompa in Lo Manthang (Mustang) Nepal

PHOTO: NANCY GREEN





## CONCLUDING REMARKS

I began with the provocative hypotheses that foreign attempts to preserve Tibetan culture have stimulated demographic and cultural transformation in the ethnically Tibetan borderlands of Nepal. Contributions by Western patrons to exile monasteries have provided critical support for a monastic revival, which in turn has generated a rising demand for new recruits. Meanwhile, the decline of fertility among Tibetan exiles has shifted the primary recruiting grounds from the refugee camps to the highlands of Nepal where high fertility combined with household level economic concerns offer compelling incentives to send children away from the village. The parents are in a win-win situation: they achieve religious merit, eliminate a son from the inheritance equation, transfer the cost of raising and educating that child to others, and can expect future remunerations. Foreign patronage for exile monasteries is thereby directly responsible for an unprecedented level of out-migration of youths from their native highlands. These individuals subsequently become instigators of culture change once they return as fully-ordained monks. Some foreign patrons envision this as a positive development, guided in their sentiments by the belief that Buddhist societies of Nepal's highlands—as in Tibet—are properly constituted with celibate monasteries occupying their focal points. In a personal conversation about monks returning from Kathmandu to build the new monastery in Nubri, one Western disciple declared, “They [returning monks] will be bringing the Dharma back to their homes.” Perhaps this person does not realize that Buddhism is already well entrenched in Nubri, albeit not in a form that revolves around celibate monasticism. Perhaps this person interprets the dearth of monastic institutions and celibate monks to mean that Nubri society has degenerated from an archetypal Tibetan cultural template. If so, then actions meant to resuscitate a “failing Buddhist heritage” have the inadvertent effect of propelling indigenous Buddhist practices and social structures to the periphery, and perhaps toward extinction. Ergo, culture change is occurring as a direct result of efforts geared toward cultural preservation.

This essay is not meant to be an indictment against Tibet's monastic tradition, which has proven to be remarkably resilient and adaptive to new circumstances. Nor do I mean to disparage Western patrons whose actions have undeniably assisted in the preservation of Buddhist teachings, many of which were threatened with extinction but are now being transmitted to a new generation of guardians. Beneficiaries, such as Tibetan exiles and parents in Nubri, have few objections against the patronage received by their religious institutions (c.f. Frechette 2004: 112-117) or the new opportunities for managing their family compositions and household economics arising from that patronage. Furthermore, this essay should not be read as a lament about

cultural changes that are now occurring throughout the Himalayan highlands. With respect to the nature of societies, I subscribe to the Buddhist viewpoint on impermanence (i.e., change is natural and inevitable), which renders problematic the very concept of “cultural preservation”. As one scholar contends,

Tibetan culture, like any other, is dynamic; calling for its ‘preservation’ automatically brings forth the need for it to be defined, and this in turn leads to a stuffed-and-mounted item fit for a museum (Sperling 2000).

Here I need to conclude on a clear note: this is a theoretical essay about potential (and perhaps actual) consequences stemming from the encounter between Tibetan lamas and their Western patrons. Some of the evidence to support my arguments is incontrovertible (e.g., fertility trends; solicitations for supporting monasteries are couched in terms of saving Tibetan culture). On the other hand, the diligent reader will certainly notice, and perhaps be perturbed by, the fact that some key arguments are not substantiated by reliable data, or are supported by anecdotal evidence. Although some parts of the thesis might sound convincing, and other parts might seem intuitively obvious, there is much that can be—and should be—subjected to critical scrutiny. A theoretical essay is no substitute for diligent research, and therefore I set forth the preceding arguments so that they can be evaluated, and then either accepted, refined, or rejected in light of empirical evidence. If this essay manages to nudge the discourse on culture change toward hitherto under-explored directions, then my goal to stimulate a more rigorous analysis of transnational processes in the Himalayan region will be fulfilled.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Revised edition (June 2005), for HIMALAYA. In 2001 I received a letter from a teacher in Nubri, Nepal, who lamented that his school was floundering because parents were sending the majority of their children to monasteries in Kathmandu and India. This prompted me to write an e-mail rant to a friend, which was forwarded (without my knowledge or permission, but in retrospect it was a serendipitous act) and continued to make the rounds until it crossed the desk of Barbara Brower. I am indebted to Barbara for encouraging me to convert some unfocused thoughts into an exploratory essay, which was completed in 2002. A delay in publication prompted me to include an abridged version of this essay's arguments in another publication (Childs 2004:68-70). The delay also allowed me to thoroughly revise the paper after returning to Nubri in May of 2005 for the first time in nearly five years.

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